

There is nothing quite so upsetting as a telephone ringing in the middle of the night. Nothing wakes us up and gets our attention as quickly as the telephone ringing by our bedside at 2 a.m. Sometimes it's a mistake; we leap into action, fumble with the light, answer the phone, braced for the worst, and the voice asks, “Is Ralph there?” With irritation but relief, we respond “No, Ralph is not here at the moment. In fact, Ralph is never here. You have the wrong number.” And then try to fall back to sleep.

Professor Paul Keim, in a commentary on the story of Eli and Samuel, says we live in a society that is “on call” twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The Omnipresent cell phone has created a whole new reality, a new set of behaviors. Cell phones ring during meetings, concerts, movies, weddings and funerals, even church.

“In the midst of all this calling,” Paul Keim asks, “how do we recognize God’s voice calling us?”

God’s calling of Samuel is one of our oldest and best stories. Perhaps 3000 years old, I love this story. It is as real of a happening now as it was then. I love the way God calls young Samuel, one... two... three... four times in the middle of the night, but Samuel doesn’t know it’s God calling. What a wonderful exchange between old Eli and young Samuel.

If you have children or have been around children overnight, you may know the experience of sleeping when, all of a sudden, a child is by your bedside. “I can’t sleep,” the child says. “I had a bad dream,” or “I think there’s a monster in the closet,” or “I heard a voice.” And you say pretty much what Old Eli said: “There’s no monster. It wasn’t my voice you heard. Get a drink of water and try to go back to sleep.” And if it happened three times, who wouldn’t say what Eli said, perhaps in exasperation: “All right. Go, lie down, and if it happens again, listen; say ‘Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.’”?

This story takes place back on the edge of history. Israel has barely evolved from a loose federation of tribes into a primitive nation. Eli is a priest who presides over a shrine, a sacred place where sacrifices are made, incense burned, and prayers said. Samuel’s parents, Hannah and Elkanah, are old and have given up on the possibility of children. And then Hannah, as happens elsewhere in scripture, turns up pregnant. They name their son Samuel and, in gratitude, present him to God at Eli’s shrine. Samuel becomes Eli’s helper, apprentice, and finally, heir. Samuel will become Israel’s first great prophet. He will anoint Israel’s first king, King Saul.

“Listen,” old Eli told Samuel. “Be quiet, stop fussing, stop talking so much, and listen.” Understanding how deeply and critically this speaks to each of us cannot be overstated. More serious, attentive listening to God and to one another would make a far better world.

Consider, first of all, *the matter of listening to one another*. Much is made, and rightly so, of the importance of communication. The subject headlines countless books, instruction manuals, and seminars, which popularly emphasize the importance of speaking- speaking up and

speaking better- the use of words more effectively. But what's the value of words if they are not heard...if the hearer is not really listening?

Charlie Brown decided to open up to Lucy, and share what he's really feeling. He says: "I wish I could be happy. I think I could be happy if my life had more purpose in it. I also think that if I was happy, I could help others to be happy...does that make sense to you?" Lucy replies, "We've had spaghetti at our house three times this month." Charlie says to himself, "Good grief." How sad. How helpful it might have been had Lucy truly listened.

Listening is the other side of communication. Words must be spoken, and spoken words need to be heard.

What difference in the quality of marriage if spouses really spoke and listened to each other.

On the light side, listen to this woman's story: "As a friend and I rode to town in her car, I noticed that she had a radar detector mounted on the dashboard. "Gladys," I asked, "why do you have a fuzz buster?" She replied, "For my birthday, I asked my husband for a dustbuster. This is what I got."

Again, this is funny. But in more serious exchanges, failure to listen can lead to sorrowful consequences.

The greatest gift we can give to another person is attend to her, attend to him, pay attention...listen...to really listen...to listen with full attention- without interruption.

Good listeners don't grow on trees. As far as I can tell, some persons hardly listen, but seem instead just to be waiting till it's time for them to start talking again, leaving the talker feeling terribly lonely.

Listening is the gift that holds within it the possibility of healing and redemption. And it operates in the workplace, between colleagues, supervisors, and supervisees, bosses and employees. It operates over coffee or shared meals. It is particularly important in meetings when the topic of discussion is controversial and people have different opinions and come to different conclusions. Listen. It is important in the most intimate of relationships. Listen. Stop talking and listen. Stop for a moment pursuing your agenda and listen to the agenda of others, their hopes, needs, hungers, grief, joys of the other, particularly the one you most passionately love.

In the 1930's Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor and theologian, took his stand publicly in opposition to Hitler and the rise of Nazi Germany. He was martyred at the end of the war for his part in the attempt to assassinate Hitler. In the 30's Bonhoeffer organized an underground seminary at Finkenwald for theological students who shared his commitment to resist the Nazis. For obvious reasons the students lived in a close, tight-knit, almost secretive community- not an easy situation in any circumstance. The health of the community was literally a matter of life and death. He wrote a remarkable little book entitled, "Life Together." One of the sections is entitled "The Ministry of Listening."

Listen to Bonhoeffer:

*The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening. Just as love to God begins with*

*listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that he not only gives us his Word but also lends us his ear.*

If listening to one another is critically important, learning better to listen to God is even more so. The old and new testaments constantly emphasize the importance of listening. Proverbs 20:12: "Ears that hear and eyes that see- the Lord made them both." Matthew 13:13: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear." Throughout the gospels, Jesus repeats: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

I love this story of Samuel and Eli because I believe God does call you and me. No doubt he does this in various ways. I believe the voice of God comes to us- in the world, for instance, in the beauty of a sunset, the power of a storm, a newborn's cry, telling us that creation is good and holy...a gift given to us new every morning. And I believe God calls us in the voice of others (another reason to listen carefully to others) to be kind and just, compassionate and generous. And I believe God speaks to us in great art and beautiful music and noble causes... like Civil Rights... like an end to hunger and disease... like education and opportunity for all children.

As a Christian, I believe that God spoke and continues to speak to us through Jesus Christ, God's word made flesh...God's word to us, spoken clearly, eloquently, and powerfully in Jesus...*in his birth and life and teaching, his kindness and compassion, his inclusive love ...calling you and me to be faithful disciples.*

I love the story of Samuel and Eli because the voice is not immediately recognizable as God. I love the story because it takes God four times to get through to Samuel... It's true for most of us, I think.

I've thought a lot about that and have concluded that we're capable of doing better. More clearly than ever, I hear God calling me to make where I live a better place, a little easier for the challenged, and a little more gentle and kind.

I've concluded that maybe it's God calling when we can't sleep because of our conscience bothering us, or we find ourselves worrying about injustice or hurting friends. And I've concluded that maybe God calls us through the questions we ask and struggle over, that maybe God wants us to be open to new thoughts and to be brave enough to be a lifelong searcher for truth and beauty. And I've concluded that God does speak to us deeply through that man we can't seem to forget or ignore, that compelling man Jesus, who was, in fact, the Word made flesh...God's word to us.

In George Bernard Shaw's play on the life of Joan of Arc, there is a scene in which the archbishop and King Charles are interrogating Joan of Arc.

The archbishop asks, "How do you know you are right?"

Joan answers, "My voices."

The king interrupts: "Oh your voices, your voices. Why don't the voices come to me, I'm the king, not you."

Joan responds: "They do come...but you do not hear them."

It's an important word that Eli says to Samuel: Listen. Amen